

## **Back Again, Back Again: Longings, Part Two**

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

**Abigail, as the intro:** Back Again, Back Again, episode eleven: Longings.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

**Ilyaas:** I made a fool of myself the next morning, Cassian and I sparring in the arena among the soldiers drilling. I was woefully out of shape, compared to Cassian, compared to the hundreds of soldiers that trained in rotation around us, and every time my sword clattered from my hands and onto the sand of the arena, someone was always watching. My focus only got worse as the morning wore on, and as much as Cassian tried to be patient, there was only so much he could take, too -- being back in the arena had only sparked the anger of last night, his frustration with the queen.

He ended up sending me to run drills with the soldiers as he fought, full out, sword flashing at speeds I could only dream of moving, with line after line of soldiers until there was a clump, standing off to the side, of people he'd beaten.

I embarrassed myself running drills -- I was slower than most everyone else, and ten minutes of running left me breathing hard while everyone else circled by without problem. I'd wanted to make a comment about having already ran that morning with Cassian, to try and save what little face I had left, but I

didn't know the words -- nor would I have had the guts to say them, to this room full of people who could drop-kick me across the sand if the urge so struck them.

There was a growing list of people that could say they'd beaten the Eligida in a sword fight by the end of the morning.

And that wasn't even where my day hit peak disaster.

I bathed. Rhia laced me into a pretty dress, gold-and-blue, with a corset -- which, god, I hadn't worn before and -- while not half as bad as that Elizabeth-Swann-fainting-scene in *Pirates of the Caribbean* makes it out to be, it pushed uncomfortably on the myriad of bruises I'd acquired earlier that day. My ribs already hurt. That was not the time to be adding a corset into the mix.

But the queen had sent the dress, and when a queen sends you a dress, the only thing to do is answer with *yes, king*, and put it on.

Cassian knocked on my door, his face just as distastefully set as I'm sure mine was at the thought of spending an afternoon making a fool out of myself in front of the entire court -- the last time I'd seen them, all together, was when I was sopping wet in a Hobbit shirt. There was something deeply anxiety-inducing about having to face them after that -- especially as I'd topped the occasion off by swooning like a fainting goat. And while there was part of me that did a little happy dance at the thought of *going to court* like in all the novels I'd read, the fact that Cassian was pissed told me that it was probably going to be less fun than I'd fantasized.

Cassian leaned against the doorway and pulled a crown out from behind his back -- it was made of thin gold spindles and wire flowers, climbing around each other like vines. Pieces of raw quartz, long and thin, were set into it like sunbeams.

*Since you liked the last one so much, he explained, and set it on my head. I grinned at him, feeling more than a little empowered by a talisman, however silly that may have been, and thanked him in English and my best Rhysean. I reached up to tilt it just slightly, like his.*

*Now we match, I said, our formal outfits once more direct opposites of each other -- gold and blue, blue and gold. I made a face. But my crown is better.*

*That's because I chose it, he joked. My taste is far superior.*

*Clearly. I looked down at my dress. Your mother sent this. It's only bruising my ribs more. Not that that's saying much, after this morning.*

*They have been gloating quite a lot, Cassian chuckled. About how easy it was to beat the Eligida in battle.*

*I snorted and rolled my eyes, shoving down the twinge of guilt that pierced my chest at not being better. At -- this. At -- being a soldier, being a hope. Before I could dwell too long, I raised my gaze back to his, lifting one hand to the crown. Thank you, I repeated, softly. For -- everything. I -- god, I wish I had money or something. Some way to get you a gift back.*

*He smiled, his tongue poking through his teeth. Then tell me about where you came from, tonight. Stories of whatever you loved most from there. That's payment more than enough. He straightened and shook the sentiment from his voice. Now -- we don't want to be late.*

*Oh, god, what a horror that would be, I joked, and let him pull me out the door, calling a good-bye to Rhia as we went.*

*All were gathered by the time we arrived -- the queen's orders to be fashionably late, to make a show, to arrive together, the soldier and the king. Cassian and I looped around from the outside to walk in through the main doors -- the ones*

I'd come through last time, with the lions on the heavy doors and golden splendor through the hall. *Chin up*, he had told me, first in Rhysean and more haltingly in English. *Strength. Don't be afraid. They will be able to tell.*

Panic: *do I kneel?* I asked, and he frowned, without a chance to respond before the doors swung open.

Cassian raised his chin: princeling, not friend. I raised mine beside him, and as much as I was freaking out over what I would do once I reached the end of the hall, it didn't stop me from taking my first stuttering steps, or matching Cassian's pace as much as he matched mine as we stormed down the aisle.

I kneeled, because I was afraid of what would happen if I was meant to and didn't. Cassian didn't, simply stood and waited for me to rise before we made our way behind the two thrones. He stood off the left of the queen, a step behind her throne, and I off the right of the king, a step behind his, flanking them. I wished we hadn't been on the outside corners, so it would feel less like everyone was staring at me. Cassian didn't look my way, simply stared ahead, arms behind him, somehow looking both regal and relaxed.

I don't know how to describe the monotony of court in a way that would make it interesting rather than the soul-sucking pit of boredom that it was. Royals of some variety or another, important in ways I didn't understand the titles to, petitioned the kings for things I didn't understand. The word *Eligida* got bounced around a fair amount of times, always from the lips of the crowd speaking first, followed up by the queen, a clarification. The king left, his eyes beginning to close sometime into the session. The queen sighed through her nose and carried on.

Even if the matters had been interesting, I had no way of understanding them, which made it infinitely less so. My sword

-- left upstairs because there was no place on my dress from which to hang it, and Rhia made a face when I'd asked that told me it had been explicitly prohibited in the courtroom -- hummed to me at just the wrong frequency, turning my vision blurry as the hours wore on, a calling in my blood: *come back. Come back.*

Common people, villagers from the towns surrounding the castle, found their way in. The first, a woman well into middle age, made the gesture for respect I still hadn't the meaning for: *shoulder shoulder cross out*. I made it back, because I had thought it was polite, and realized, my face turning bright red as sounds of discontent wove their way through the court, that that was the wrong choice to make.

Cassian explained it to me that evening. The woman was escorted out before her request could be made.

A question was asked, to what I assumed was me: the word *Eligida* had become so much like a name that I responded to it on instinct, but the rest of the sentence was lost under a mound of Rhysean I didn't know. The petitioner that'd made the comment -- a young noble-sort that looked around mine and Cassian's age -- stared expectantly at me, his dark gaze piercing.

I stuttered, lost. My face was only beginning to turn red before Cassian gracefully cut in, rattling off an answer that seemed to please the boy before I'd had time to recover my head.

The sky was dark by the time we finally were excused, the court disbanding, heading back to their various own estates of whatever sort. The queen, Cassian, and I stayed until the rest of them had gone, I not daring to move until one of the other two on the dais did first.

Finally, as the boy who'd asked the question of me finally left, Cassian broke and turned towards me, sticking out his arms, finally not Cassian the King, but human -- tired and glad it was over. I fell into them like a fool, and I whispered

choice unfriendly words to him concerning carpal tunnel that made him laugh.

The queen cleared her throat. We broke apart. They exchanged words in Rhysean, Cassian and the queen, that ended in him thanking his mother and pulling me out a back door, breaking into a run as the door slammed behind us and we hurtled through back hallways. I was tripping over my dress and trying to hike it up with my free hand, laughing, until he pushed out a door that led to --

A bedroom. His bedroom.

I froze, because this was oddly intimate. He'd seen my room a dozen times -- most mornings, since he'd stopped knocking and running and started waiting on the floor outside my room in the morning. He'd sat at my desk as I struggled through children's readers on my bed as he and Rhia laughed and went on in Rhysean, a history between them I barely understood unravelling itself to anyone that could see them. He'd laid upside-down across my bed, me beside him, heads sticking over the edge so all the blood rushed to our brains, as we complained about the queen.

But this -- hadn't happened.

For someone who'd lived there for seventeen years, it looked remarkably... not-Cassian. The same sort of decor my room had was found in his, a bed and a desk and a wardrobe, a second door to a room I assumed was the bathroom. For all we decorate our rooms back home, line them with everything that makes up our souls, his was -- bare.

Books sat on the corner of his desk, but there were no shelves. Papers were strewn across the rest of the desk, and a jar of ink and a pen sat on top of them, but that was the most character the space had. A banner hung above his bed: the golden lion's head and crossed swords on midnight-blue backing.

It was -- god, I don't know. The part of me that had considered what his bedroom looked like had pictured it like a 17-year-old-boy's here: posters, a little-played guitar, lamps and pillows and a closet full of childhood.

He didn't notice my hesitation. *They'll bring dinner up here. Court days are always exhausting -- I need a break, I'm taking off my binder.* He disappeared into his closet before flopping onto his bed, sticking his head and shoulders over the edge so far I was convinced, for a moment, that he'd keep sliding and hit his head. His crown clattered to the ground, and he cursed: English, one of the ones I'd taught him as a joke, then frowned and said it a lot more vehemently in Rhysean. One arm reached to the floor to scoop it up and he put it onto his stomach, balancing precariously on the slowly-slipping king.

I felt the corner of my mouth quirk up. He was ridiculous, but he was known, like this, a creature I understood. I leaned against the doorway. Cassian frowned.

*Sit down,* he asked. *I know your feet hurt, because mine do. And then: You promised me stories, in exchange for your crown.*

*I never promised,* I said, both of us already aware of how obliging I'd be, *you commanded and assumed I would.*

He laughed, the sound wheezy from the way he hung. *I'm a king. Tell me a story, Ilyaas.*

We did this a lot: I begged stories from him about Rhysea, and he told me about growing up. He begged from me stories about my world -- about here -- and I told him about the best things I could, small things that wouldn't need explaining of impossibilities: Rhysea had magic, we had electricity as a substitute. I tried to make it sound like I missed it -- because, selfishly, as much as I complained about the training, as much as I hated how foolish I seemed, I was wanted, without a doubt. I was important -- and people told me as much -- I was

the main character of a fantasy novel that ended in victory and started in prophecy. I wasn't worrying about SAT scores and AP tests and homework, done late into the night, for the first time in years.

I missed people, friends, sometimes late at night, but hardly ever by light of day. And that faded, too, as the months wore on.

So I exaggerated the details. Made here a caricature of what it was, because I was afraid homesickness would set in for real if I told it the way it was -- the stars, in constellations familiar rather than foreign. The way the moon cast shadows across the lake, how at the right time of night you could cup the moonlight in your hands, how the cicadas sang and in the spring pollen coated everything so thick you could swipe your hand across the hood of your car and have it come off bright yellow.

That was what I would miss, if I allowed myself to dwell on it: those bits of the world that make your heart ache as you realize the scale of everything around you. There is a mundane sort of magic that lives in the woods of Georgia, that comes out at gloaming, and it finds its way into your heart and pulls if you don't guard against it.

So I joked about the tests, the teachers. I explained public school and received appropriate amounts of horrified dismay at the descriptions of the food and how straight-cis the public schools of the Bible Belt are and how sticky everything in those schools are, all the time, from too many years of continuous use and not nearly enough washing.

We ate, and kept telling stories, and sometime around midnight I found myself lying with my head on Cassian's stomach, laughing as I listened to him laugh, trying to throw pieces of bread into his mouth and failing more times than not.



*It's a skill, he kept insisting, it can be learned if we try hard enough.*

Laughter and midnights. I stole his crown and sang him songs that I knew, made him sing some back, walking songs and drinking songs and court arias, the kind that children stand in the middle of the ballroom to sing when their parents show them off to society.

I fell asleep there, still in my court dress. Cassian woke up before I truly did -- his shifting stirring me into somewhere half-awake, but he stayed silent, unsure by the light of day.

I went back to my room to change. Rhia was there, waiting -- she shot up, taking in my wrinkled dress and bedhead and the song I was humming, a marching song that stuck from the night before.

She opened her mouth, then closed it again, unsure. *Ilyaas -- did the -- did you and -- Cassian -- are you --*

She didn't seem to know how to form that sentence, but her meaning was clear enough: my face flushed at her insinuation, ears burning. *No, I snapped. No -- we. Talked. And it was late and I fell asleep. Nothing more happened.*

Cassian *didn't*. We were both somewhere between ace and demi, in here-terms. We *didn't*. Do *that*. Fundamentally, as people.

She pursed her lips but didn't comment, helped me out of the dress and into clothes meant for fighting.

And life continued, in that way, for six weeks: mornings training. Afternoons into the evenings at court, sometimes with Cassian opposite me, sometimes alone with the kings, silent on a pedestal.

He had other things to do -- soldiers to train, a country to learn to run, a poet to find. I had no such excuse -- so day after day I stood.

My Rhysean came to a screeching halt -- it's impossible to pick up words when the people around you speak a million miles an hour, when they hardly ever have the object to which they're referring. Dinners were spent in silence, Cassian and I no longer allowed to dine elsewhere.

And -- I learned nothing more, for six weeks. The one time I asked the queen at dinner for my lessons to resume with Rhia: *please, king, I fear I will not learn what I need to, I ask that you give me an afternoon to spend with the menstrana de eligida* -- it was shut down.

*You will have Cassian to translate. Or, you will learn the more you stay in court.*

And I asked -- *please, king, I fear I do not know what I am fighting for, I ask that you let me go and see the people --*

*Not until you can carry yourself without fear of tripping over your own sword.*

And, god, I hated it -- for all she talked about expecting me to be better, expecting me to learn to become the Vatakina Eligida, of living up to the expectations she'd created -- she trapped me. Didn't want me to go any further than the walls of the castle. Didn't want me to learn more than what she deemed safe, somewhere within her convoluted mind.

I didn't doubt that Cassian was doing right, but I doubted the queen. And it sparked a tiny rebellion, down in my stomach, that refused to burn itself out.

I wanted to know more. I wanted to prove myself -- *savior of Rhysea, good with a sword, quick with her words.*

Call it the AP kid in me. Call it whatever the hell you'd like -- insecurity, self-righteousness, a savior complex.

But it didn't stop me from cornering Rhia, late one night after court, after dinner, and begging her to teach me everything the queen said I should not.

And she looked at me, blinked once, twice, three times, and agreed without another thought.

This was the beginning of our understanding. This was also the end of the beginning.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

**Abigail, as the outro:** Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you'd like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr @backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigailelizawrites. Our outro music is Nightingales by Pierce Murphy from the album To Japan, and is licensed under an Attribution License. The song was retrieved from FreeMusicArchive.org. Visit the description of this episode for full copyright information and a link to the page. Sound effect attribution, similarly, can be found in the episode description.

If you've made it this far, thanks for sticking around. You are important in this world and have a role no one else can fill. You are loved. I hope you have a wonderful day.